

# THE REAL RUSSIA

"How Is a Revolution to Occur Among a People Nine-Tenths of Whom Are Plunged in Ignorance"

"The Only Force Which Can Maintain Russia of To-day as Russia of To-morrow Is the Hand of an Autocrat"



By  
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It is most difficult, if not impossible, for any American or Englishman who has not been in touch with the Russian people to understand the present situation in Russia. For one, who lives in a country where nine-tenths of the people read newspapers, and are *au courant* with all the daily happenings of the world, to realize the actualities of a country in which nine-tenths of the people can neither read nor write and evince not the slightest interest in public affairs is beyond the practical limits of the imagination.

Of the one hundred and forty millions now composing the population of Russia one hundred and twenty-six millions are entirely illiterate, and take no interest in and exert no influence upon public affairs whatever.

I once, just prior to the beginning of the war with Japan, suggested to the Czar in a jocular way that there seemed to be some room for improvement in the Russian method of government.

He said in reply, frankly and with unmistakable sincerity: "You say that there are some things which might be done better than they are; but you do not know our conditions. The problems presented to us are unlike those of any other Government in the world. When I tell you that a hundred and twenty-six millions of our people are illiterate, and that the great majority have only just emerged from barbarism, while of many even that could not be said, you can understand some of our difficulties. We have found in experience that if we take young men without fortune and put them in universities and graduate them, give them the higher education, but no means of applying their knowledge or of earning a livelihood, they become unhappy, discontented and revolutionary."

"We consequently have adopted a plan which we think better. Every year we draw as many as possible into the army, not for war, because the world knows well that I desire peace, but for education. We require everyone in the army to learn at least to read and write, to have the rudiments of an education, before he can gain freedom from military duty. If he can attain this in three years, well and good; if not, he is compelled to remain for four or even five years. And it is our experience that when we have given him this elementary education and the discipline of army life we have done a great deal toward making him a good citizen."

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This is the governmental view and the governmental plan. But to realize the inertness and ignorance of the peasant class with which it has to deal, the real Russia of the peasant, the station-masters at Wilna and Dvinsk are not a bad illustration. Four days after the war broke out, I left St. Petersburg for Berlin, and all the way down to Wirballen, on the Russian side of the frontier, was naturally anxious to know of any new developments at Port Arthur. While the whole civilized world outside of Russia was throbbing over the dramatic story of the torpedo attack upon the Russian ships of war and the destruction of the Variag and Korietz at Chemulpo, while this exciting news was known in the homes of every town in the United States,

I left the train both at Wilna and at Dvinsk to ask the station-masters: "Have you any late news?"

"News of what?"

"The war."

"What war?"

They stared at me with polite surprise and stolid ignorance. I did not answer, because as they were merely Russians I feared that the facts might not interest them.

I went back to the train and waited for Wirballen. At the news stand of the station I asked for the French and German papers. They offered me the illustrated papers and comic journals of the week preceding. I explained that I wanted the daily papers, and they promptly offered me a Berlin paper four days old. But it had been to St. Petersburg before it returned to Wirballen on the train preceding mine, and contained no reference to the war.

All the peoples of the world knew of the war except the Russian peasants. The great current of their common life moved on without disturbance. Men came and went to their ordinary avocations; few knew that there was a war, and all were entirely indifferent respecting it. So they have moved ever since, and it would be entirely safe to say that a vast number of the people of Russia do not know to-day that a war has been in progress. And when one talks of a revolution, which is either a great popular movement or nothing, how is a revolution to occur among a people nine-tenths of whom are plunged in a crass ignorance which is equaled only by their utter indifference?

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In such a country reforms are difficult and a revolution is impossible. We read and hear daily that Russia is on the verge of a great upheaval similar to the French Revolution. But in France there was an intelligent peasantry, educated by Voltaire and Rousseau and intellectually ready for revolt. It was a homogeneous population, the people were compact, and the distances were short. Men could march, if necessary, from Bordeaux and Marseilles upon Paris. The army was under the command of Lafayette, himself a Republican, educated to liberal ideas in the United States. And the army spoke the language of the people.

Now, Russia is a country of many races and many tongues and many religions. It is a country of vast distances, and even if any man were able to walk from Odessa or Kieff to St. Petersburg or Moscow, he could not leave his town without the consent of the police, and without having his passport visé by the police, a police too which stands solidly for the Government and could not be induced to stand otherwise. There is no temptation which can be offered them, as a class, to stand otherwise.

It is the principle which is lacking. What is that principle to be? It cannot be a government

by the people, for nine-tenths of the people would not know the meaning of the phrase. All the intelligent people in Russia, from the Czar downward, recognize the necessity for a change. But what the change is to be not one of them can tell.

I had a talk not long ago with M. de Witte, admittedly the ablest states-

man in Russia, and he said without hesitation: "The conditions are very bad, but the problem is how to reform them." The Minister of Finance and Prince Sviatopolk-Mirsky both accepted as *bien entendu* the statement that the existing conditions were insupportable, but said that no one yet had offered a practical solution. "Any solution which ignores the peasant is no solution at all," said de Witte, and this is the fact.

Minute minorities, theorists, dreamers, revolutionists and others are clamoring from their own narrow standpoints, ignorant of and indifferent to the general situation. The question is being discussed openly and everywhere by all intelligent Russians, in a way that fifteen years ago was unknown and impossible. In that day no one dared to speak of reform. That the whole situation has liberalized is evident from the widespread discussions of to-day in the hotel reading-rooms and cafés of St. Petersburg, which at the former period would have been held only in whispers and behind locked doors.

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There are only two classes in Russia, the nobles, or governing class, and the peasants. The latter, as has been said, constitute nine-tenths. The remaining tenth, outside of the nobles, is largely German. All the rich merchants in the large cities are Germans, and there is scarcely a prominent Russian merchant in all Russia. The bureaucratic class, the clerks, are almost entirely of German descent. These clerks originally were imported by a former Czar, partly as a precautionary measure, and partly through the entire lack of clerical material at home. Nobles could not be clerks, and peasants knew too little.

Now, this bureaucratic class, the "Chinoviks," is numerically large, but totally without progressive spirit. They are politically inert, their sympathies are naturally with the Government through which they profit, and the radical elements, and even the better Russian element, hate them cordially as foreign intruders upon the scene. But they form an appreciable part of the educated tenth.

As factories have developed in late years, there has grown up a working class, which now, in its entirety throughout the Empire, numbers perhaps two and a half millions. These are the elements who are striking and rioting, just as working-men, under injustice, strike and riot in all countries.

But the important point is that as yet there are only two factors in the problem, the noble and the peasant. There is no middle class. Out of the two and a half millions of working-men the future middle class of Russia is being born only now.

Here then is a country containing a small dominant class of real Russians, a commercial class

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